

While working in Freetown this summer, I was pleased to meet Mike Butscher, who set up a chapter of PEN, the worldwide association of writers, in Sierra Leone in 2003. Mike and the Sierra Leone PEN committee are endeavouring to promote Sierra Leonean writers and writing and to advance the publishing industry in a country where the majority of people cannot read or write. We met in the small office which is the headquarters of PEN Sierra Leone in Freetown.

‘To even get a space to write, let alone a PC to type up a manuscript can be a challenge. Writing can be a very lonely task here. It’s hard to find role models, to get advice, and most of all to get practical support locally. Publishing opportunities are very few. We are trying to set up an income-generating project like a printing press to save us from begging all the time. We do not have the money to buy the second hand press yet. We need to see Sierra Leoneans writing and published in Sierra Leone so that we can believe we can create a literature of our own, right here in our homeland.’

Butscher and his team’s vision for PEN Sierra Leone is of an organisation with a writers’ centre where people can come to consult books on writing, access the Internet, get details of local and international publishing outlets, attend writing workshops, read novels by fellow Sierra Leonean and other African writers, use a PC to type up their work, and get general assistance, information and advice on issues such as contracts and copyright.

This small office is already providing some of these services. Working in collaboration with the British Council PEN Sierra Leone has brought the British/Sierra Leonean writer, Aminatta Forna, and the British writer, Caryl Phillips, to Freetown to give a number of workshops on writing creative non-fiction. Another recent visitor was the Sierra Leonean writer Syl Cheney Coker – now based in the United States – who gave a talk to PEN Sierra Leone. In addition to the practical learning experience, these high-profile visitors have helped to promote the work of the group

A Literature of Our Own: Publishing in Post-War Sierra Leone

Helen Fallon
Deputy Librarian
National University of Ireland



*Mike Butscher
outside the PEN Centre*

and have heightened the profile of writers and writing in the country.

In a country where the average annual income is US\$470 per person, and life expectancy is 34.5 years, Butscher is finding it difficult to convince government and other planners that creating a literature by Sierra Leoneans is a useful task. Despite this lack of government support and funding, he has set up PenPoint publishers. PenPoint hopes to publish an anthology of poems and short stories by Sierra Leoneans shortly. Many submissions have already been received from all over the country.

PEN Sierra Leone organised the first writers' award ceremony in January 2005, when fourteen Sierra Leoneans were honoured for their contribution to Sierra Leonean literature. The ceremony was attended by guests from the UK, USA, Austria and Germany. PEN Sierra Leone's members include Osman Conteh, who won the 2002 Macmillan Writers Prize for Africa.

Butscher's voluntary efforts received a boost when the writer Caryl Phillips wrote an article about the organisation in the *Guardian Review*, 19 July 2003. Following this, the UK-based publisher FlameBooks teamed up with Butscher and a group of international authors to bring out a collection of short stories, *Book of Voices*, in support of the organisation.

Despite a new education policy in Sierra Leone in 2002, most schools do not have libraries. PEN has established school clubs to encourage reading and writing among young people whose attentions – according to Butscher – are fixed on Nigerian movies (the girls) and the European and English football league (the boys). These clubs members meet in writing workshops and organise reading at school. Many students have written poems and short stories that are published in the *Young PENPoint* magazine.

'Literature reflects our cultural heritage. We have a rich tradition of poetry and storytelling which tell about our history and way of life. The civil war in Sierra Leone; it gave birth to many writers, poets and musicians and performers who all have stories, poetic lines and accounts of what the war did to them or others. Since PEN was established, we have discovered many new writers that we are keen to publish if we can get funding or publishers interested in our work. If we do not have a written literature of our own, how can our children and our children's children know of the times we lived in. Through our writing we have the potential to leave a rich legacy.'

Pen Sierra Leone can be contacted at <sierraleonepen@yahoo.co.uk>



Inside the PEN Centre, Freetown